

## **Submission to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee on Australia's Relations with Papua New Guinea and other Pacific island countries**

### **'Australia must intervene militarily to restore law and order in Solomon Islands'**

Solomon Islands in 2002 is in a perilous state. It is four years since the country was thrown into turmoil by a vicious civil war, euphemistically termed 'ethnic tensions' by Solomon Islanders, which cost at least one hundred lives, destroyed property, crippled the economy, terrorised ordinary Solomon Islanders and brought down a government. It is almost two years since an Australian-sponsored peace agreement ushered in an uneasy truce, but tension is as strong as ever. Development has stalled; the government is bankrupt; the economy is in ruins, the government has no money to pay public officials regularly; public utilities (water, sewerage, power) are in disrepair; the health system is in collapse; natural resources are left idle with employment and loss of foreign exchange implications; education facilities are idle, or nearly so; and there is almost non-existent foreign investment.

Among the many problems facing Solomon Islands, the most serious and immediate is the break down in law and order. Lawlessness is rife on the streets of Honiara with 'order' maintained through the barrel of a gun. Despite the expiration of the illegal weapons amnesty on 31 May 2002, as many as 500 high powered military-style weapons taken from police armouries are believed to be still at large. The police force is incapable and unwilling to maintain law and order. It was compromised by its complicity in the coup when many police, including senior officers, joined ranks with one of the militias.

In May 2000, then Prime Minister Ulufa'alu, recognising that the law and order situation was out of control formally requested the Australian government to provide military assistance. Foreign Minister Downer refused stating that law and order was the Solomon Islands government's responsibility, that Australia had no intention of being a neo-colonial power and that 'Australia is not prepared to take an overbearing interventionist approach. It has been proven not to work in the past and, worse still, to leave a terrible legacy behind'. The next month, the only Pacific coup outside of Fiji removed Ulufa'alu from office. Prior to the December 2001 elections, Ulufa'alu's replacement as prime minister, Manesseh Sogavare, again requested the Australian government for help, this time it was for a contingent of police to assist in combating crime in the lead-up to the 2001 elections. Again the answer was no, and for the same reasons.

Australia is contributing significantly to the strengthening of the law enforcement, justice and prisons systems. However, advisory assistance to the Solomon Islands Police Service is unlikely to be effective as the service is irretrievably compromised. The police service has lost the confidence of the Solomon Islands public and it is incapable and unwilling to restore law and order.

My strong suggestion is that Australia might take on a law enforcement function with military and/or police contingents, on the request of the Solomon Islands government, in association with honest Solomon Islands police and perhaps in conjunction with other regional countries. This suggestion is in no way made in ignorance of the potential difficulties of such an action. There are certainly issues of practicality to consider in deploying a military or police peace-making force, among them precisely how would such a force operate, the risks to Australian soldiers or police and the regional precedent it presents.

Nevertheless, Solomon Islands will not recover left to its own devices and it will not recover unless the law and order situation is brought under control. The livelihoods of the country's more than 400,000 citizens depend on the forceful intervention of Australia. Solomon Islands is more vulnerable to external threats than ever in its history. Australia may be uncomfortable with the tag of 'mini superpower' in the Pacific, but that is the reality. Perhaps the best indication of this point is how Pacific island leaders themselves view Australia. When former Prime Minister Bart Ulufa'alu's desperate calls for help were rejected, he said in an ABC television interview in May 2000 (i.e. before the coup) that 'Australia and New Zealand are supposed to be responsible for the region'.

Australia has a responsibility to intervene decisively in a military or police manner because the Solomon Islands government is simply incapable of delivering law and order to the country and Australia is the only country that has the capacity to do so.

There is no longer any point in saying to the Solomon Islands' government that they must restore law and order – they simply cannot.

Solomon Islands is in very real danger of collapsing as a state and becoming just one more basket case. Australia alone, or in association with New Zealand and other Pacific states, has the capability to restore order to the Solomons.

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